

**KEEFE & WESNER ARCHITECTS, P.C.**  
ARCHITECTURE & PLANNING

David Munyak, Chair  
Middletown Springs Building Committee  
Town of Middletown Springs,  
P.O. Box 1232,  
Middletown Springs,  
Vermont 05757

July 13, 2012

RE: Historic Context for New Town Office

Dear David:

As requested we visited the Town on July 3, 2012 and met with interested citizens of the town including members of the Middletown Springs Building Committee and the Historical Society, to review documentation of the built environment over the history of the town, and to walk the area around the town green and observe the current conditions. You have previously provided a draft copy of the Middletown Springs Building Committee Progress Report through May 15, 2012, and some background about the Town green and the need for a new town office. This assessment is partially funded by the Preservation Trust of Vermont, and looks at the issues in siting and designing a new town office from the perspective of current historic preservation standards and good practice, based on principles articulated in The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects.

**Brief History**

The Town with a population of less than 800 has done a remarkable job of grappling with the difficult issue of improving their Town Office, including development of a Capital Facilities Master Plan in 2006 that highlights the current deficiencies and cites the legal responsibilities of the Town to manage and store vital records. A Town Plan adopted in 2007 further underlines the need for improved Town Offices and cites opinion surveys that not only support improvements to the Town Office but specifically recommend a new building for this purpose at the Parker's Garage site at the four corners, both to 'heal' the site and to address the Town Office needs. The Building Committee has reviewed the town needs and priorities, investigated funding sources and specific experiences of nearby towns, articulating criteria for evaluating potential sites and applying them systematically to 11 sites, culminating in a recommendation to the Town to purchase the Parker Garage site. Working in concert, the Selectboard has acted on the recommendations, public opinion and research/negotiations to purchase the Parker

Garage site, and is now engaged in developing a budget, funding options and design guidelines that will lead to a bond vote, and design/construction of the new Town Office.

### Historic Context

Middletown Springs -originally Middletown until the rediscovery of local mineral springs in 1868 – has a traditional New England town green at the crossroads in the center of the town with a mix of commercial, institutional and residential buildings around it, and at one time had the Congregational Church on the green itself. The Church was moved to the NE corner just off the green at the start of the Civil War, but still owns the green, which currently has no buildings on it. Historic photos reveal many of the changes that have occurred, particularly along the south side of the green, where a solid row of commercial buildings (stores; a livery; a hotel) formed a 2-story street wall in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> C. after the Montvert Hotel was built in 1871. A Federal style brick residence, slightly set back from the street wall, terminated the row of buildings on the south side of East St. at the site of the later Parker Service Station, and two other wood-framed churches graced the west side of the green and SW corner opposite.

All of these buildings are gone now, with the exception of several historic wood frame buildings which extend along East Street east of the green, including the Dyar Leffingwell store, now a residence, and the former "Cat's Eye" shop, in earlier times the town library and the post office.

This has weakened the architectural continuity of the village center, leaving the impression of missing teeth, but can be re-established with contextually sensitive new construction. Wooden 2-story residences on the east and north side of the green remain but have been converted to commercial and institutional uses. The current Historical Society/Town Office that started life as a residence, and became successively James Ives' store, the Adams House boarding house/hotel/ millinery/funeral parlor, and – after the fire in 1920 was renovated by the Town into the Community House with a new porte cochere, auditorium and public rooms for meetings, suppers, Grange, Town Meeting, elections, theatricals, movies, concerts, dances, school events, athletics, etc. This change-of-use is typical in the life of historic buildings; had the commercial buildings remained on the south side of the green, they might well be candidates for conversion to town offices. The 1806 former church on the west is now designated as a 'non-contributing' building in the NR District due to the extensive alterations it has experienced; it is flanked by 2-story historic residences, brick on the south and wood-framed on the north.

Mature maples and elms that graced the green until the 1970s are gone, roads have been paved and widened, and modern features have accrued including poles with overhead wires, signage, highway pavement markings, streetlights and gravel shoulders. The presence of roads and power lines is now prominent, and the more recently-planted collection of disparate trees on the green together with the absence of

substantial buildings on the south, weakens the symbolic historic center-of-the-community feel that often exists on village greens in Vermont.

There is an order to the built environment around the green that stems from its historic patterns of settlement and is still very much in evidence today. All buildings are orthogonal to the compass orientation of the green and the crossroads streets; buildings are mainly wood frame now, but there is also a strong brick masonry tradition. Buildings today are mostly 2-stories, with punched true divided-light vertically-oriented windows and painted white sash, pitched gable roofs sloping between 30° and 40°, wooden cornices with returns, brick chimneys and vernacular wood trim. Most buildings have stylistic elements that are symmetrical; commercial buildings tend to be set close to the street while residential buildings are typically situated back some distance with a front lawn and often fences.

Many features that were established in earlier buildings remain important, including gable-front orientation and narrow spacing for commercial or public buildings, with sidewalks or at least pathways in front, and 1-story porches on the front – often with columns that are echoed in allées of trees. The ‘sense of the common’ reflects a social, economic and political order, with all parts relating to the central pattern regardless of whether they are in public or private ownership. While the central role of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> C. churches has declined, the ones that remain are still the tallest and most prominent structures in the village.

Architectural styles of Middletown Springs buildings include Federal (Georgian), Greek Revival, Italianate, Victorian (several variations), Colonial Revival and Neo-Classical, with vernacular interpretations often employed by local craftsmen, resulting in rich and varied language and pattern of building types and elements. While these do not constitute a grab bag of mix’n’match elements, designers should take cues from the patterns and precedents in designing a contemporary Town Office that will look and feel at home in this setting.

### Other Considerations

Combining the Town Office with a Library has been discussed; advantages would include more and better shared central space for an important community resource, added activity and citizen involvement, and possible efficiencies of combined use. Possible disadvantages include cost, need for additional parking and signage, and increased size/scale to accommodate both uses. Many small towns combine these functions with mixed degrees of success; both require assembly, access and code features that can be shared, but careful space planning is needed to avoid conflicts.

Use of a front porch as transitional waiting area for children catching school busses or waiting to be picked up has advantages in centralized location and community oversight, but possible problems with traffic/congestion and risk to the building from unsupervised youths.

The site selected for the new town office at the SW corner of the green was originally a prominent residence, later a utilitarian gas station, and now is almost devoid of buildings but remains scarred by remnants of foundations, tank covers, and assorted detritus. Healing this site is one of the town goals, and a handsome, functional, historically-contextual new town office building would not only erase the unsightly remains but fill in one of the prominent gaps around the green that has contributed to the erosion of the village core since its peak in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards encourage new buildings in historic districts to acknowledge and respect the historic context in their massing, materials, relationship of solids to voids, and color, while maintaining a clear differentiation between historic and contemporary work. This idea of "contextual but not imitative" is full of subtlety and much-debated in the Preservation community, but should be part of the discussion in planning new buildings in historic settings.

### New Town Office

Although one building cannot address and rectify all of the issues and concerns in a town center, it can reinforce the identity and historic pattern of the town, and contribute a strong building block in the process of recapturing the sense of place that characterizes it. Issues that should be considered include:

Siting – building should sit forward on the corner lot to reinforce the 'street wall', orthogonal to green, with parking behind. It will have two principal 'fronts', on East St. and on South St, and needs to formally address both. A new corner building will reinforce East St. and South St. building patterns, with largest/public buildings at the center of town, next to the green.

Massing – two stories is the pattern; a porch and higher center/lower wings/edges provides direction to the public. Building needs to anchor the corner. Additions treated as individual sections, to relate larger buildings to residential scale of village.

Architectural style – should fit the 19<sup>th</sup> c. context, including pitched gable roof, individual 'punched' windows/doors, with trim, finishes and details in scale with neighboring buildings; public should be able to see the connection to traditional building design.

Scale – human scale is a critical part of the pattern. The Town Office can be one of the larger buildings in town, but should use details/materials and massing to maintain the feel of a small rural residential community. It should also be in scale with appropriate construction and maintenance costs for this community.

Materials – wood frame with clapboard siding and vernacular wood trim, or brick masonry with wood cornices/porches are the vernacular language of Middletown Springs. Repeated 'types' of elements (windows; siding; cornices; roofing shingles; brick

chimneys; etc.) reinforces the architectural language of the village, and helps to draw all buildings into a visual and spatial community.

Color – establishes building's character especially on wood-sided and trimmed buildings. Color affects the streetscape; a color scheme should be neighborly as well as aesthetically effective.

The building needs to be designed as part of an existing whole, not as a stand-alone statement of individual difference. In practical terms this means it should not be angled or rotated off of the existing grid, it should not employ atypical shapes, forms or details that call attention to it, and it should not be limited to the least expensive materials or design details available. It need not look exactly like a 19<sup>th</sup> c. building, but the relationship to 19<sup>th</sup> c. settlement patterns, design elements and 'feel' is important to maintain.

Integration with 21<sup>st</sup> c. demands will require careful study of circulation, traffic, parking, energy efficiency, communications technology and wastewater treatment requirements, which can easily override aesthetic and contextual standards if not approached comprehensively. Most towns reserve the right to modify or apply their planning and design review regulations in the best interests of the community; because Middletown Springs has not enacted such regulations, there is an opportunity for direct participation by all members of the community to reflect their joint decisions about this new community resource. State regulations are less flexible but there are usually reasonable accommodations that can be achieved with sufficient planning.

## Conclusion

In responding to a dramatic loss from a fire many decades ago, Middletown Springs has an unusual opportunity to provide useful administrative space in an attractive and appropriately-sited and detailed new building at the Town Center, in a manner that will strengthen both the function and aesthetic/historic appearance of the Town. The community has already made a substantial and thoughtful commitment of time and effort to bring the planning to its current state. By paying attention to historic precedent currently seen in existing buildings and their relation to each other, and making sure that the entire town is heard and their opinions reflected in the planning, the community can create a new Town building that is appropriate for this important site, and reinforces the sense of place that clearly matters here.

Attached are a few quick sketch drawings to illustrate some of the ideas discussed above; the MS Historical Society has an outstanding collection of historic photos and related documents that should not be missed, and give an extraordinary sense of this small community in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to meet and work with the MS Historical Society and some of the community on this complex but fascinating issue; I hope this report will assist you in continuing with the excellent work already accomplished towards getting a new Town Office for Middletown Springs. Please don't hesitate to contact us if we can further assist in any way.

Sincerely yours-

Thomas F. Keefe, Architect  
Keefe & Wesner, Architects, PC  
TFK/hos/Encl.

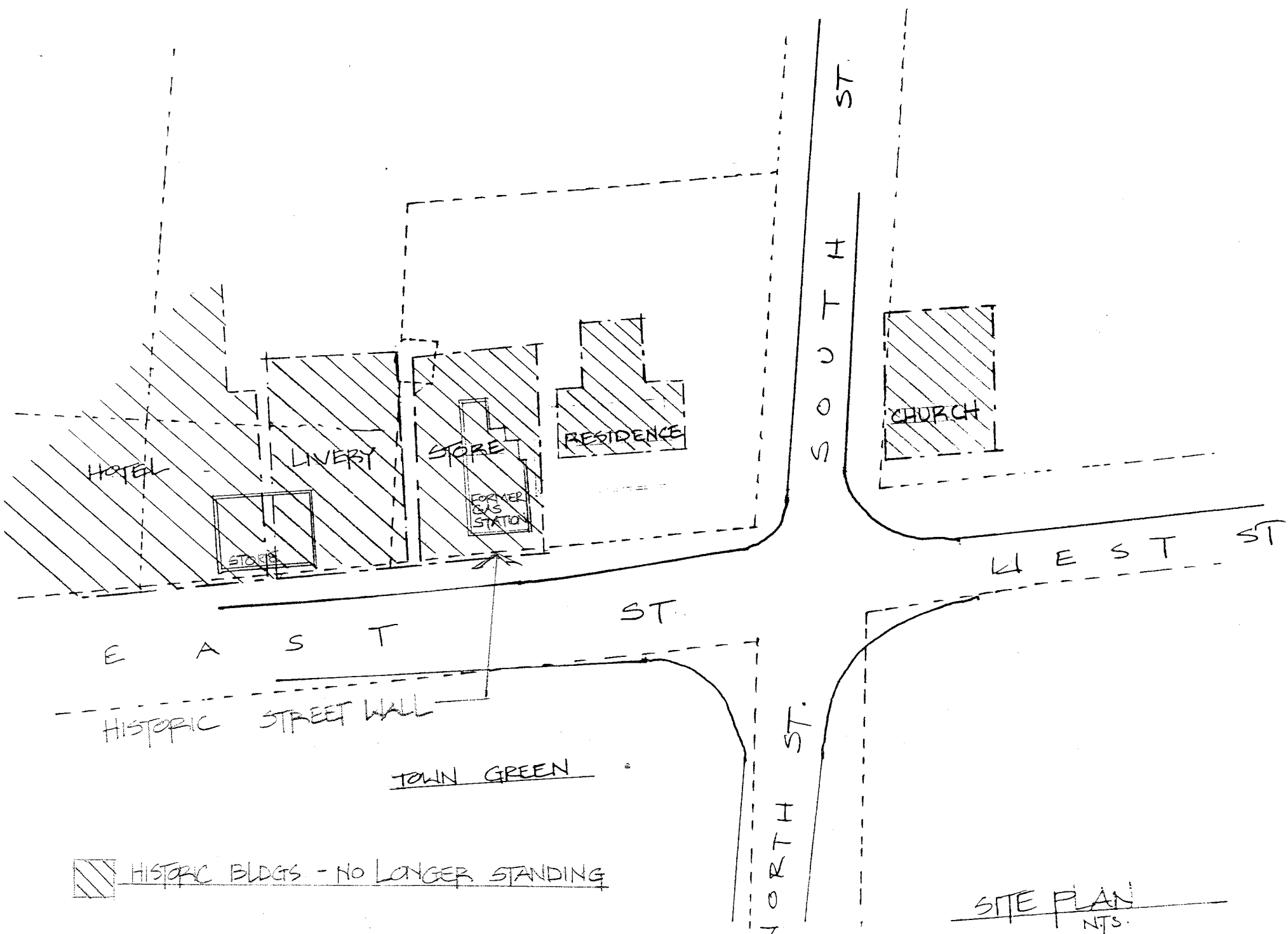
Special thanks to David Wright and David Munyak for assistance in many of the details of historic events and for use of the excellent collection of photos in the MSHS collection.










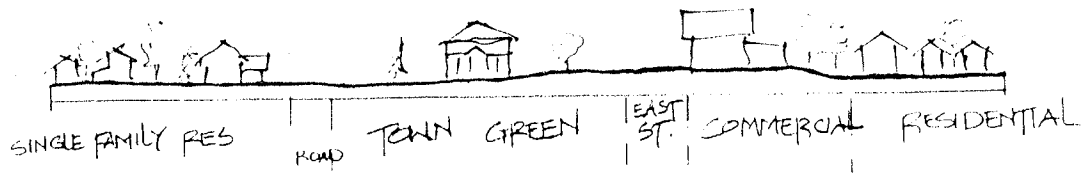


 HISTORIC BLDGS - NO LONGER STANDING

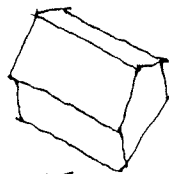
SITE PLAN  
NTS.



CARPENTER, PHOTO. MIDDLETOWN SPRINGS, VT.



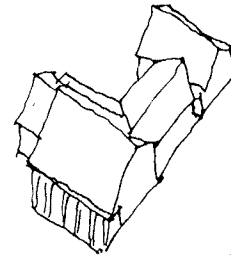
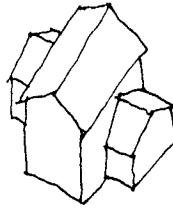
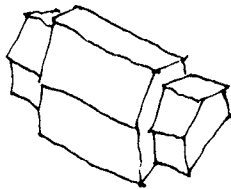
N-S TRANSECT SECTION @ GREEN - SCALE



EAVE FRONT

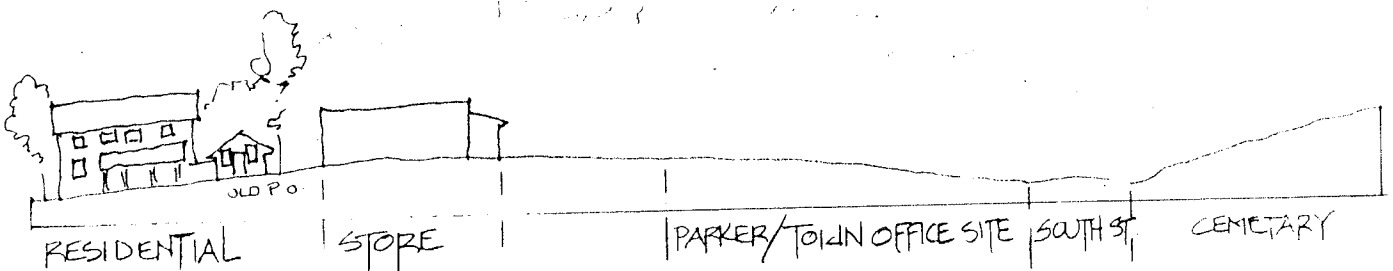


GABLE FRONT



### MASSING COMBINATIONS

- WINGS HAVE SIMILAR ROOF PITCHES TO MAIN BLOCK
- ARTICULATE AS SEPARATE PIECES OF THE BASIC FORM



E-W TRANSECT SECTION @ E. ST. - SCALE



CORBELLED CHIMNEY

ARCHITECTURAL ROOF ELEMENT  
SIGNALS IMPORTANCE OF  
PUBLIC BUILDING

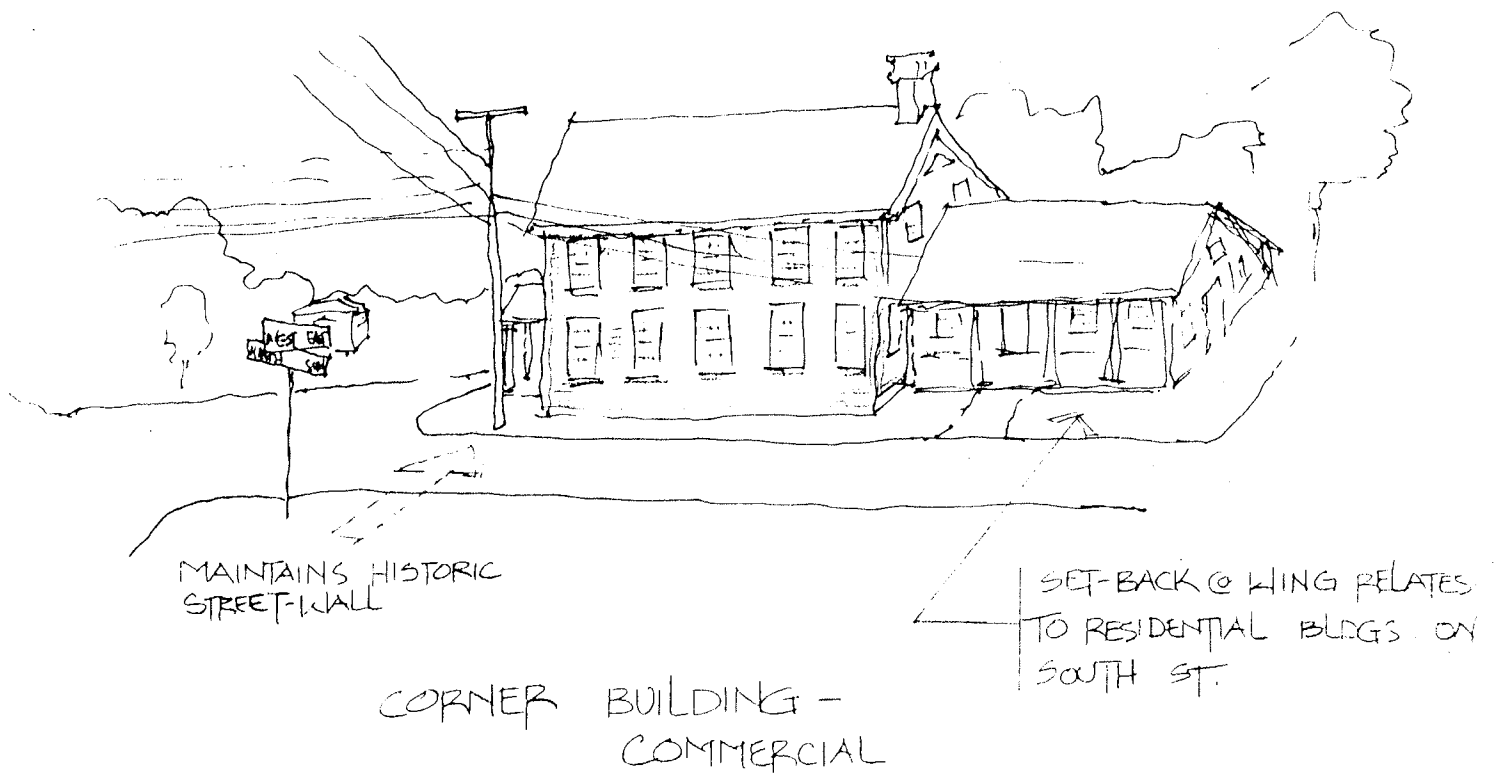
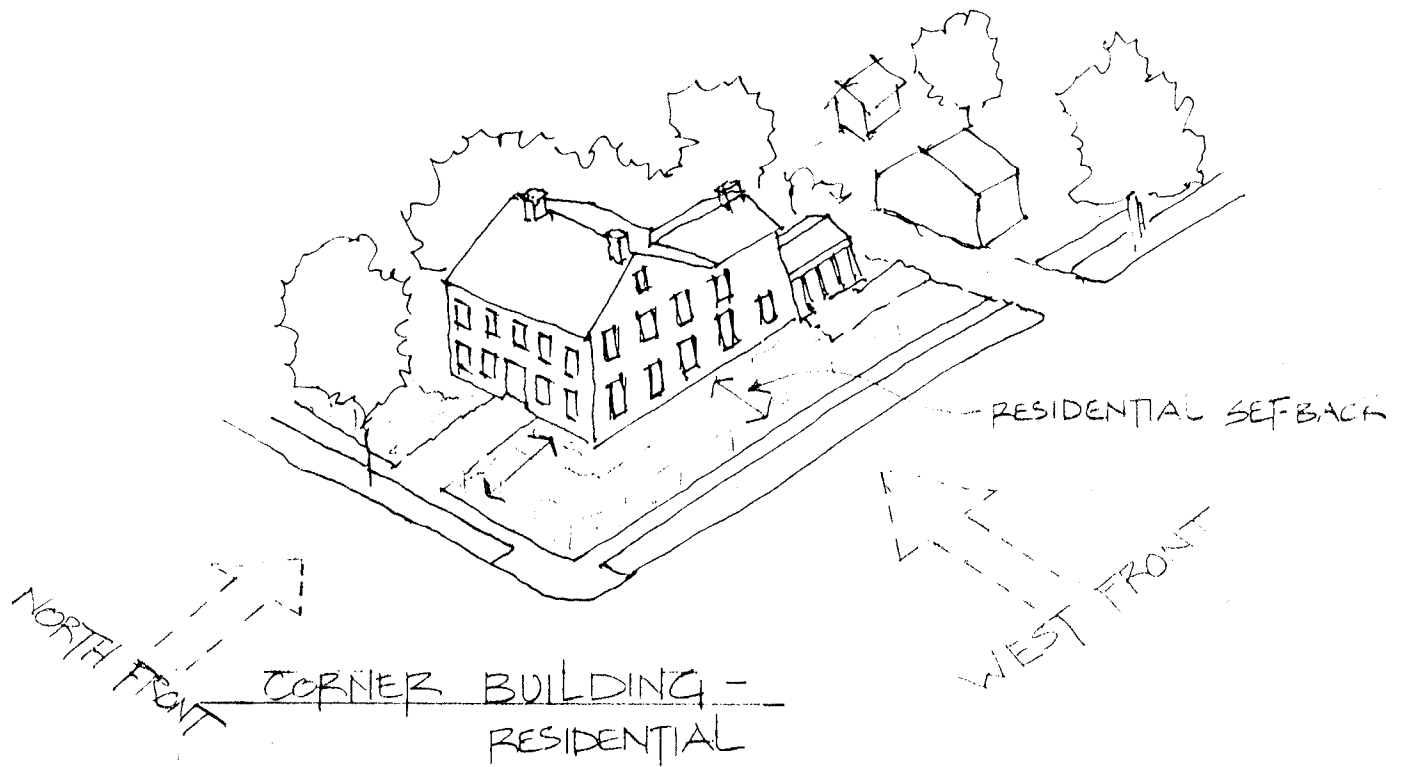
GABLE ROOF

TALLER CENTER W/  
LOWER WINGS

"PUNCHED" WINDOWS  
W/ VERTICAL ORIENTATION

COLUMNS & PORCHES ON  
PUBLIC FACADE

TYPICAL 19<sup>th</sup> C. CIVIC BUILDING







*A cinder block garage facing the common in Middletown Springs*

c. 1970

# A MIDDLETOWN SPRINGS VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT MAP

Listed in part in the National Register of Historic Places  
(Numbers correspond to Register listing that follows.)

